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Moscow Gets Ready to Trade

A swap for Shcharansky may signal more superpower bargaining

The plain iron span over the Havel River joining Potsdam, East Germany, to West Berlin has long been legendary as the "Bridge of Spies." Across it walked Francis Gary Powers, pilot of the ill-fated U-2 reconnaissance plane shot down over the Soviet Union, who was freed in 1962 in exchange for Soviet Master Spy Rudolf Abel. Last June the bridge was used to trade four Communist-bloc agents for 25 Europeans who had been imprisoned in the East for espionage. Usually such prisoners are traded in secret, often in the foggy predawn hours. Last week, however, the western end of the 128-meter Glienicker Bridge was teeming with reporters and camera crews. They were eagerly staked out for what the West German tabloid *Bild Zeitung* melodramatically heralded as "the biggest human swap ever."

If all goes according to plan this week, the famous Soviet dissident Anatoli Shcharansky will join the ranks of cold war captives who have crossed the Glienicker Bridge to freedom. The news that Shcharansky and several others would be swapped for a number of East bloc spies in Western custody leaked to *Bild Zeitung* by what it called "Moscow Kremlin circles" and confirmed last week by European officials, caused an instant sensation in the West.

Before he was sentenced to 13 years of prison and hard labor in July 1978, Shcharansky had been a visible and articulate spokesman for human rights activists and Jewish refuseniks denied emigration from the Soviet Union *(see box)*. His conviction on trumped-up charges of spying for the U.S. was widely regarded as a sign of crumbling détente. Moscow's apparent decision to free Shcharansky—and to telegraph it in advance—no doubt reflects more concern for propaganda than for human rights. But the Kremlin's willingness to swap a dissident whose freedom has been long sought by the West may also be an important sign that the Soviets are serious about improving superpower relations.

Indeed, diplomacy was breaking out on a number of East-West fronts last week. In Washington, President Reagan approved a proposed counteroffer to the Kremlin's sweeping new arms-reduction proposal, which calls for the abolition of nuclear weapons by the year 2000. The tentative U.S. reply, which must still be reviewed with U.S. allies before being presented at the Geneva arms-control talks, embraces Moscow's plan to eliminate U.S. and Soviet missiles from Europe but rejects the Soviet proposal that Britain and France halt any upgrading of their nuclear arsenals. It calls for a 50% cut in the Soviet intermediate-range missile force in Asia.

In Moscow, meanwhile, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev told visiting Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts that the next summit with President Reagan must produce concrete results rather than the general statements about reducing the threat of war that concluded the first Gorbachev-Reagan meeting in Geneva last November. In a striking turnaround, Gorbachev seemed to enhance the prospect for a deal on missiles in Europe by stating that the Soviets would not insist that the U.S. first agree to abandon research on a space-based defense system (Star Wars). According to Kennedy, Gorbachev said "in emphatic and unmistakable terms that there are no preconditions for negotiating immediate reductions" in intermediate-range nuclear forces.

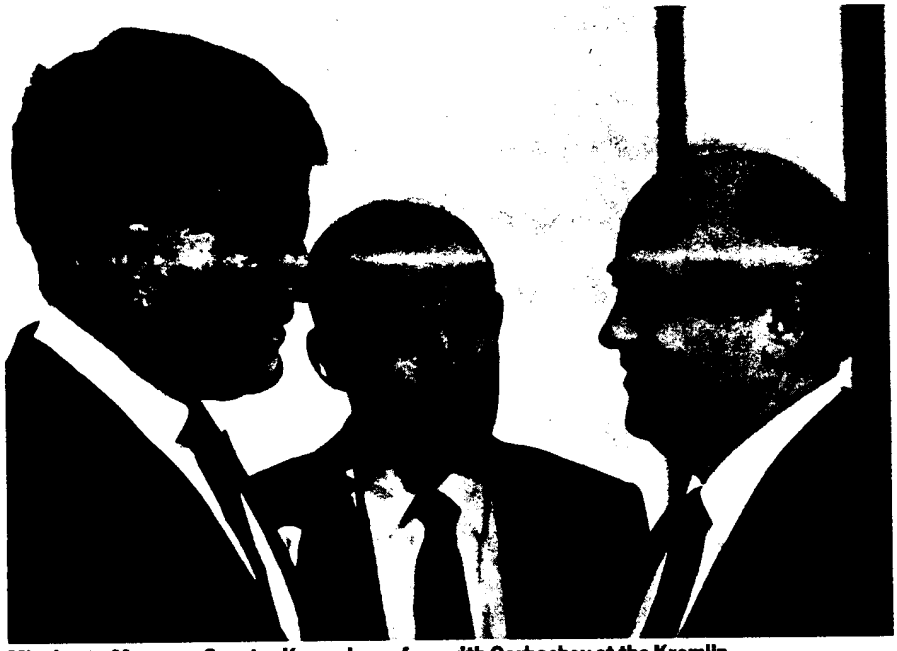
Kennedy wound up his Soviet visit Friday with a surprise appearance on Moscow television's evening news program. Despite "unavoidable disagreements" between the U.S. and Soviet Union, the Senator said, the two nations shared "undeniable common interests—the overriding imperative of nuclear-arms control." Back in Washington at week's end, the Senator announced that Gorbachev had given him a goodwill present: an agreement to allow the emigration of 19 Jewish refuseniks, some of whom had applied for exit visas as long ago as 1971. Kennedy, who had previously traveled to the U.S.S.R. seeking similar releases, accepted the Soviets' invitation to return only on the assurance that he would not leave disappointed.

The prospective Shcharansky swap, which was negotiated separately from the arrangement with Kennedy, would be the culmination of quiet bargaining that began almost as soon as the Soviet dissident was convicted eight years ago. President Jimmy Carter had repeatedly pressed the Soviets for the release of Shcharansky and other dissidents. Shortly before his Vienna summit with Leonid Brezhnev, Carter won freedom for five Soviet prisoners of conscience, including Human Rights Activist Alexander Ginzburg, but Shcharansky continued to languish in the gulag.

President Reagan in his turn vowed to confront Soviet human rights abuses with "quiet diplomacy." At the Geneva summit, he made it clear to Gorbachev that the issue stood high on the superpower agenda and that he was more interested in "outcomes" than talk. "We want to see results," he said.

Shortly thereafter, Gorbachev began making good on promises that he would permit a number of husbands and wives who had been separated from their spouses to leave the U.S.S.R. Nine such families have since been reunited. Then, on Feb. 3, came the sensational leak about the Shcharansky swap. Western officials feared that publicity might botch the delicate negotiating process, but late last week the deal still appeared to be on track. The trade reportedly will include about four spies on each side, as well as the Soviet dissident.

Spy-for-spy exchanges are not uncommon in the gray world of espionage. But the U.S. has traditionally been reluctant to trade professional agents for dissidents; the deal engineered by the Carter Administration swapping two Soviet spies for Ginzburg in 1979 was the first such ex-



Mission to Moscow: Senator Kennedy confers with Gorbachev at the Kremlin

An emphatic "no preconditions" for reductions in European missiles.

change. There is a risk that by trading real spies for Shcharansky, the West will implicitly legitimize the Kremlin's trumped-up espionage charge against him. "It's a good joke inside the Kremlin, a great way to make Shcharansky look like a paid agent of the state," scoffs a former West German intelligence official. Nonetheless, Reagan advised his senior aides that if swapping convicted spies for Shcharansky is "the only way to get him out, let's do it."

By this time, freeing Shcharansky is "an easy give" for the Soviets, says a State Department official. "They used him to discredit the Jewish dissident movement when they needed that," says one Administration spokesman. "They don't need him anymore." What is more, freeing the Soviet Union's most famous Jewish refusenik seems aimed at helping Moscow's apparent efforts to mend relations with Israel, broken off by the Soviets in 1967.

The Shcharansky swap does not mean that the Soviet Union is easing up on human rights. There is no current speculation that an even more celebrated dissident, Nobel Peace Prizewinner Andrei Sakharov, will win his freedom any time soon. Sakharov's wife Yelena Bonner was given permission last fall to visit Boston for treatment of a heart condition. But Gorbachev told the French Communist newspaper *L'Humanité* last week that the nuclear physicist, who had helped develop the Soviet hydrogen bomb, "is still considered in possession of state secrets and cannot leave the U.S.S.R."

According to the New York–based Helsinki Watch Committee, an independent group that monitors Soviet human rights abuses, the Kremlin under Gorbachev has continued to ferret out and arrest the few dissidents and human rights activists who are not already in labor camps or psychiatric hospitals. And while the Soviet Union permitted a few more Jews to emigrate in 1985 than it did in 1984—1,140, vs. 896—Jewish emigration still lags far behind its peak year of 1979, when 51,320 Jews were allowed to leave.

Some Moscow watchers see the Shcharansky deal as a propaganda gesture aimed largely at Western Europe. It has long been Moscow's design to split the NATO alliance by persuading European voters that the Soviet Union is essentially reasonable. But other Kremlinologists take a more sanguine view of the Shcharansky swap. "It alerts us that Gorbachev means business," says Princeton University Political Scientist Stephen Cohen. "He wants to remove certain roadblocks to U.S.-Soviet relations." Whatever the Soviets' real agenda, the announced swap will at least free Shcharansky from the horrors of the gulag. In the cold world of superpower diplomacy, that is no small achievement. ***—By Evan Thomas. Reported by James O. Jackson/Moscow and Johanna McGeary/Washington***